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BY ANTHONY DIMAGGIO

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The “War on Terror” at 20+ Years: A Retrospective



Image by [Aidan Bartos](#).

September 2021 marked the twentieth anniversary of the “War on Terror.” As the war turned 20, the U.S. under the Biden administration initiated a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, prompting howls of concern and outrage from journalists, pundits, and his political critics in government. The alarm among intellectuals is something I [wrote](#) about at length at the time.

The U.S. finds itself in a strange place in 2022. U.S. officials never declared an end to the “War on Terror,” although the wars of the George W. Bush years in Afghanistan and Iraq gradually faded into memory. While the rhetoric of “anti-terrorism” is not what it once was in the heyday of U.S. wars fought during the 2000s, to say that the threat of war has dissipated would be a serious mistake. It’s a distinct possibility that the U.S. could find

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itself fighting new wars, particularly if the public is again whipped up into a state of war fever in the wake of a major terrorist attack on American soil.

Numerous questions remain about where the public stands 20 plus years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. What do Americans think about our past wars, and would the public stomach renewed violence in the name of fighting al Qaeda, ISIS, or some other Islamist movement that's hostile to the United States if a future president (or the current one) recommitted the U.S. to the "War on Terror"?

To answer these questions, I fielded some survey questions, funded by my home institution Lehigh University, through the Harris polling group in the spring of 2022. This polling coincided with a political-history course I taught at the time titled "The War on Terror in Media, Politics, and Memory." The poll was part of an applied learning class exercise that was meant to give students hands on experience in the science of studying public opinion. With the help of Harris, we were able to contact 3,075 Americans in a nationally representative sample, querying the public about their thoughts regarding the "War on Terror" as it entered its twenty-first year.

On the question of public opinion of U.S. wars in the 2000s, our first question asked Americans what they thought "in hindsight" about "the U.S. war in Iraq." The survey found overwhelming hostility toward the war, with nearly 8 in 10 Americans (79 percent) opposing it for various reasons, and with just 21 percent saying, "I support the war in Iraq, and feel it was not a mistake."

For the 79 percent of Americans who opposed the war, their reasons for doing so were many. Twenty percent felt "it was a mistake and unwinnable"; 17 percent that "there were too many American military casualties"; 15 percent that "it was not morally justified"; and 11 percent that "it was too costly, from a financial perspective." Scholars have passionately debated why Americans oppose foreign wars, with some emphasizing the cost in casualties, others focusing on concerns with wars becoming unwinnable, and some focusing on the question of war as immoral. The Harris results suggest that, at least in hindsight, Americans are not of one mind about why they oppose war. Some reasons are largely or entirely pragmatic, as with those framing a war as no longer likely to succeed or emphasizing that its financial cost is too high. Others reflect a substantive and foundational rejection of the legitimacy of war itself, particularly for those who feel the Iraq war was immoral.

One serious challenge is that it's difficult to define what people mean when they say a war isn't morally justified. In the last two decades that I've studied public opinion polls, I

never saw a single pollster ask Americans what they mean by “immorality” when it comes to assessing U.S. wars. To address this shortcoming, I fielded a second question with Harris that posed a scenario to Americans:

“Many critics of the Iraq war claimed that it was not morally justified...what do you, personally, think war critics meant when they talked about the Iraq war as not morally justified?” This question was designed to better understand what it means for the public to talk about a war that’s understood to be morally indefensible.

Again, Americans are divided in their opinions. Forty-six percent believe that to talk about immorality in the Iraq war is to talk about a war that “was sold based on false claims – specifically allegations that Iraq possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction and ties to al Qaeda.” Another 31 percent think that immorality translates into a concern that “there were too many U.S. military casualties.” More than a quarter of Americans (26 percent) think that immorality equates to a concern that the war “was fought to gain control of Iraq’s oil.” Finally, 22 percent associate immorality with a war in which “there were too many Iraqi civilian casualties.”

In terms of larger lessons, the Harris poll tells us a few things. First, a plurality of Americans recognize that the war was fought based on deception and manipulation. Second, concerns with casualties are multi-faceted, with most Americans – 53 percent – associating immorality of war with American or Iraqi deaths. A final point – tens of millions of American adults believe the U.S. fights wars for imperialistic purposes – in this case a war for oil – despite U.S. officials, journalists, and academics overwhelmingly ignoring this point during the Bush years and beyond. On the question of a war for oil, there is a serious disconnect between much of the public and political officials in terms of the willingness of the former (and the denial of the latter) to recognize that the U.S. is driven by unsavory motives.

Beyond the lessons above, there’s the question of where we go from here as the “War on Terror” enters a political limbo, persisting somewhere between a continued commitment to large ground wars and “ending the endless wars” – a promise former President Donald Trump made while in office, but never kept. To address this question, the Harris poll posed to Americans the following scenario and question:

“President George W. Bush promised shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks that the ‘war on terrorism’ he declared would take many years, and involve sacrifices, but that one day the U.S. would prevail. How do you look at this ‘war on terrorism,’ more than 20 years later?”

On this question, Americans express some serious divisions in terms of their commitment to continuing the war. Nearly a third (32 percent), believe that “declaring an end to the war on terrorism is premature right now because of the possibility of future terrorist attacks.” An equal number say that “the war on terrorism was not a success, and it’s time to declare an end to this larger war and focus instead on individual terrorist threats in the future.” Finally, only a small minority – 17 percent – feel “the war on terrorism was a success, and it’s time to declare an end to this larger war and focus instead on individual terrorist threats in the future.”

I take a few main lessons from this final question. For one, it is damning that less than one in five Americans feel there was a clear “victory” that emerged from the “War on Terror,” despite two decades into this war. A second lesson – I think U.S. officials are likely to find it deeply troubling that a plurality of Americans – 49 percent – support an end to the “War on Terror,” even if that support is based on various and conflicting reasons. There’s never been a willingness on the part of the political class to declare an end to this war. And they’ve expressed support for continuing the war (Republicans in particular) as recently as late 2021, when the U.S. began its final withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Finally, it’s troubling that there is no clear majority opinion when it comes to assessments of the “War on Terror” more than 20 years into this conflict. And a solid third of the public wants to continue the war, despite the reality that the U.S. wars and militarism in the Middle East are highly polarizing, destructive, criminal (in the case of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq), and dangerous in terms of fueling a dramatic rise in terrorist attacks in Iraq, throughout the Middle East, and beyond.

The divided nature of the public suggests that it remains susceptible to a renewed propaganda campaign from political officialdom to renew the U.S. commitment to the “War on Terror,” particularly if the U.S. is victim to another major terrorist attack in the future. The precarious state of public opinion is hardly surprising in a country as polarized as ours. Still, this ambivalence could be readily exploited by political leaders in the Democratic or Republican Party (or both), should the political class decide they wish to recommit to new fronts in their war.

Without a reinvigorated anti-war movement working proactively to build up mass opposition to U.S. militarism, it’s unlikely that the public will have much success in preventing future military adventures. Social movement scholars have long understood that mass movements rise to oppose perceived injustices. In the case of U.S. militarism, public opposition typically comes too late to restrain U.S. leaders from going to war.

Anthony DiMaggio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Lehigh University. He is the author of *Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here* (Routledge, 2022), in addition to *Rebellion in America* (Routledge, 2020), and *Unequal America* (Routledge, 2021). He can be reached at: anthonydimaggio612@gmail.com. A digital copy of *Rebellion in America* can be read for free [here](#).

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